United Nations E/CN.5/2001/NGO/9

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
26 January 2001
English
Original: French

Commission for Social Development
Thirty-ninth session
13-23 February 2001
Item 3 (b) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development: review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups

Statement submitted by the International Federation of Associations of the Elderly (FIAPA), a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

* * *

* E/CN.5/2001/1.

01-23093 (E) 080201 090201

For a transnational policy for older persons

The United Nations Principles for Older Persons were adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in resolution 46/91.

These principles are divided into five sections: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity.

In the interests of their independence, older persons should be able to procure food, shelter, water, clothing and health care through self-help and by having at their disposal income and community support.

These persons should be able to work or gain access to other sources of income and should have a say in arrangements for their pension. Furthermore, they must be able to attend appropriate training courses and live in a safe environment suited to their needs, so that they can remain in their own home for as long as possible.

The United Nations affirms, in respect of older persons' participation, that they should form an integral part of the community, participate in the formulation of policies affecting them and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations.

These principles state, with regard to care, that the persons in question should receive family and community care in keeping with the level of protection and the cultural benchmarks of the society in which they live. They should be able to obtain health care in order to maintain or regain psychological well-being so as to ward off or delay the onset of diseases causing disability. They should be allowed to avail themselves of social or legal services enabling them to enhance their autonomy and should enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms.

As for self-fulfilment, the United Nations requests Governments to ensure that older persons can realize their full potential and have access to the cultural and recreational resources of society.

Lastly, on the subject of dignity, older persons should be able to live in safety without ever being exploited or physically or mentally abused and they, like all other persons, should be treated without discrimination on grounds of age, gender, racial or ethnic background or economic circumstances.

This is a holistic view of the older person which FIAPA, together with its member associations, has always advocated, for the question of rights, while not being a recent issue, is now taking on some new aspects.

The United Nations has been concerned with this matter since 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed, but during recent years it has organized numerous international summits to identify various obstacles to these fundamental rights in a context of enormous changes in the world population. The United Nations Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Establishment of an International Criminal Court, held in 1998 in Rome at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, was significant in that it adopted the Statute of the International Criminal Court, which specifically refers to crimes against the elderly.

More general results may be described as a substantial and welcome change of course.

At the most recent Group of Eight summit convened in July in Okinawa, the Japanese Presidency, supported by the delegations of Italy and the United Kingdom, proposed a three-pronged common strategy:

- To ensure that older persons enjoy a high quality of life after they retire from work;
- To make sure that they have the requisite occupational skills to allow them to fit back into the working world after retirement;
- To facilitate voluntary activities of benefit to the community after the normal working cycle of life.

The principles already set forth in the Vienna declaration of 1998 on "Ageing in Europe: solidarity between generations as a fundamental of social cohesion" are thus echoed and fleshed out.

Starting with the key idea that solidarity between the generations is the sine qua non underpinning the future and the social cohesion of tomorrow's societies, the Vienna declaration emphasizes the need to:

- Describe old age as an active phase of life in order to convey a positive public image of older people and prevent their being regarded as a burden;

- Define the purpose and volume of the transfer of resources and ideas between generations in order to heighten an awareness of mutual dependence;
- Promote mutual comprehension and cooperation among generations through constant support for schemes in which several generations take part;
- Encourage the media to underline the merits of all age brackets through a realistic representation of persons at all phases of their lives;
- Give greater weight to the principle of lifelong learning;
- Enhance the status of honorary functions in order to create an environment of solidarity between generations which extends beyond the family;
- Demonstrate the importance of families for solidarity among generations, work out measures to assist members of the family caring for relatives and see to it that the intermediate generation has social security cover;
- Enable older persons to look after their own interests through opportunities for participation in all levels of decision-making affecting them;
- Actively further the role of older persons as guardians and legatees of the cultural heritage of experience and specific knowledge in the interest of young people;
- Promote health in middle age and later years in order to reduce dependency.

In addition to these pointers, the Vienna meeting mapped out some basic steps to be taken in order to gain a better understanding of the ageing process and assist the sharing of experience.

Firstly, it would be useful to set up an observatory with the support of the European Commission, which would be able not only to pinpoint demographic trends throughout Europe, but also to analyse the impact of social policy choices on all age groups in the population and on families.

On the basis of its studies, this observatory should then work out measures and recommendations on European policy in this field. Greater impetus should be given to machinery for exchanging good practices at European level by actively involving Governments, non-governmental organizations and experts from various countries.

Population forecasts and assessments of their effects will have to be used to underpin political decisions. The latest demographic forecasts for developing countries show that the ageing of their population will be a critical issue for them in 40 to 50 years' time.

That is a very short time, given that between now and then they will have to wage an all-out struggle against war, exploitation and poverty.

The first way of helping them, which is also the simplest and least restrictive method, is to relieve their enormous debt burden to the rich countries. Last year, Italy was the first European country to vote for the cancellation of this debt, while at the same time linking this move to certain measures designed to prevent assets being used in the future for military purposes or aggression against other countries.

Then, means must be found of internationally penalizing developed countries which systematically exploit the human and material resources of poor countries.

The only reliable remedy to migration is to foster conditions making for peace and economic growth, which is essential if all citizens are to live and grow old in dignity in their own country, among their own people and surrounded by their own culture.

In order to create the conditions for growth, economic assistance must be accompanied by training and transfers of knowledge, so that these countries can turn their human resources into genuine managerial classes.

These people, once they have become engineers, economists, agronomists or health workers, depending on the needs of each country, must be encouraged to reinvest their knowledge and skills in their countries of origin.

The remainder of the population must be helped to support themselves and their families by turning family resources to good account without harming the environment. Although this problem concerns the rest of the world in various ways and to a differing extent, it is Europe's duty to continue to follow and fuel the current debate about the inclusion of a European

charter of fundamental rights in the treaties of the European Union.

The European Council held in Cologne in 1999 drew everyone's attention to the need to draft such a charter, in order to recognize and protect these rights at a supranational European level.

Nicole Fontaine, the President of the European Parliament, went even further by calling for the inclusion of this charter in the treaties of the European Union. At the Intergovernmental Conference held in Nice in December 2000, great weight was attached to that discussion. Many heads of Government stated, albeit in subtly different wording, that its fundamental goal was to strengthen the political and social core of the Union.

The aim is therefore to look beyond the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997, which laid the foundations for closer European social cohesion, but which contained many shortcomings when it came to recognizing the rights of older persons, which were couched solely in negative terms, such as the right to non-exclusion.

The codification of fundamental rights does not guarantee their observance, but in many parts of the world public-spiritedness and respect for the human being are unknown owing to the absence of such a legal safeguard and the abuse of power, hatred and war gain the upper hand at the expense of the weakest: the elderly, children and women.

In order to ensure that the needs of these people are respected, action must be taken to extend the observance of fundamental human rights throughout the world and this can be done only by taking our geopolitical and historic experiences as a starting point.

All such action must be free of any form of economic neo-imperialism and of any desire to force a European model of civilization on the world; the precise aim must be to contribute to other cultures and civilizations, depending on their degree of advancement, and to inspire them to share universal principles concerning human beings.

Older Europeans can do a great deal to that end, because they have freed their countries from poverty, war, intolerance and oppression and have forged a model of continental integration imbued with the principles of democracy, liberty and solidarity.

A model which, over the last 50 years, has proved that it can work might be an incentive for Europe and the developed nations of the earth to act in the eyes of the rest of the world as the agents of global sustainable development.

Older persons' organizations are prepared to play their role in this context by promoting the overall integration and greater legitimacy of international institutions representing principles and values rather than economic and financial considerations and opportunities.

If at world level the enormous potential and rich resources which older persons constitute for the society of the third millennium is recognized and given greater emphasis it will be a victory for all, young and old, women and children of the whole world.

FIAPA is calling for a transition from the study of often theoretical arguments to practical choices and feasible projects designed to secure a role and place more in tune with the new image of the older person of the third millennium.

It would be possible:

In the ethical and social field

- *To respect the rights of older persons as citizens (to combat all forms of physical or non-physical violence, all deprivation of liberty, and all forms of suffering and discrimination due to age);*
- *To promote the active commitment and participation of older persons in all social fields (political, occupational and solidarity);*
- *In particular to encourage active and passive voluntary activities of older persons by using cooperation among associations, which can prove essential when it comes to the political representation of their expectations and demands, but which likewise constitutes an acknowledgement of their right to participate in decisions related to choices concerning them;*

In the working world

- *To introduce annual wage increments, set the duration of working life at 35 to 37 years for example and abolish the statutory retirement age, thus making it possible for the individual to choose a rhythm of life making for self-fulfilment;*

- *To take one or two sabbatical years and to defer retirement age accordingly. This would make it possible for men and women to devote themselves to subjects of interest to them (culture, further training or recreation) and to establish an age for stopping work in keeping with the demography of each country (between the ages of 70 and 75, for example);*

- *To promote the employment of older persons who would train young people and teach them all they knew in exchange for which the wages of one of them would be exempt from social security contributions or the social security contributions of both would be reduced by 50 per cent. This would permit the passing on of knowledge, especially in small and medium-sized businesses and industries and would cut the number of job seekers;*

- *To provide continuing and in-service training for older persons, above all in the sphere of new technologies;*

In the field of pensions

- *In the European Community, for example, to adopt legislation entitling a wage earner to apply for a pension in the last country in which he or she has worked (this would avoid a great deal of time-wasting paperwork);*

- *In Africa, to introduce a housing policy for older persons and to allocate a housing unit to an older person who also took in a youngster, provided that the latter promised to write down all the older person's historical, philosophical and other knowledge, in order to build up the long-awaited African library;*

- *To allow older persons the freedom to continue work or embark on new activities, although they had already reached retirement age, in recognition of the fact that these moves would substantially further their integration at productive, financial and social level (i.e. in the world of work);*

Within the family

- *To introduce a family wage for housewives on which social security contributions would be deducted to pay for a pension;*

- *To devise a system of entitlements according to the number of children, for housewives contribute added value to the country's economy;*

- *To promote exchanges between generations by young people teaching their elders about the new technologies;*

- *To promote exchanges between generations (through the passing on of experience and voluntary care in the family and neighbourhood) to facilitate the integration of older persons in a family context;*

- *To develop integrated home health care to help families meet the needs of older persons in difficulty;*

In the fields of town planning and housing

- *To plan housing which includes units for older persons so that they are not isolated but maintain contact with the community;*

- *To set aside a quota of housing units for dependent persons (whether or not elderly) when blocks are built. These housing units should be designed and equipped in such a way as to permit rational use by a disabled person;*

In the financial field

- *To help developing countries by scaling back part of their debt provided that the amounts in question are devoted to a proper social policy (investment in health, education, public security, etc.);*

- *To improve older persons' ability to save in order to promote the development of services and financial independence.*

In conclusion, a joint commitment must exist and must focus on certain basic lines of thinking which must be translated into practice. As it evolves, this joint commitment must rest on certain fundamental notions which must be translated into firm pledges and be respected in government decisions:

- Ageing is now a universal phenomenon affecting both developed and developing countries; old age is just one phase of life and the older person, like any other human being, must be seen primarily as an individual;

- Policies seeking to guarantee a high quality of life and protect health and true democracy for all must be centred on respect for human dignity;
- Freedom of choice in all phases of life must not depend on economic, cultural or other factors;
- One goal must be to counter solitude in order to alleviate all forms of exclusion, especially the isolation of older persons in modern societies;
- The great human and cultural heritage constituted by the older members of all societies must be used to the best advantage;
- The most developed countries must undertake to assist less well-off countries while fully respecting their traditions and culture;
- **The cultural leap, which would be epoch-making in all respects and which would consist in regarding older persons not as a burden, but as a resource for the development of humanity, must be made.**

IN BRIEF:

We should attempt to arrive at specific, appropriate definitions of fundamental concepts such as active ageing, ageing in good health, parameters of human dignity, quality of life and social inclusion/exclusion so as to identify specific individual features of older persons' lives.